Chapter 3

Gandhi’s Autobiography: Inscribing India through ‘Constructions’ and ‘Experiments’.

I have examined Indian spiritual traditions in the previous chapter and its contribution to the static nature of Indian civilization. In this chapter, I will survey two facets of Gandhi’s discourse, that is, ‘experiments’/construction of India and the feminisation of politics. Orientalism imagined India to be its own European trope. To counter the European image of India, the nationalists explored the possibility of framing India within indigenous paradigms. Therefore, in examining Gandhi’s Autobiography, I shall focus on Gandhi’s construction/ ‘experiments’ about India, which conjured a spiritual and “celibate nation” (Alter 8). As an alternative discourse, Gandhi’s idea of imagining India in spiritual vocabulary fixed the Orient (Indian) with the myth of a religious nation. There is a paradox in nationalism as a resistance discourse. In the process of self-determination, the nationalists resisted the colonial myth of the Self and the Other and at the same time unwittingly employed cultural symbols which the Orientalists had stressed upon.

M. K. Gandhi’s Autobiography was published in two volumes in 1927 and 1929. It was originally written in Gujarati and translated in English by Gandhi’s secretary, Mahadev Desai. Pyarelal, another secretary of Gandhi, translated the chapters XXIX-XLIII of part V. Gandhi’s Autobiography was an exposition of his ‘experiments’ launched in South Africa whose inferences were applied to India. The Autobiography appeared as a separate book. Initially it was serialised for Navajivan. Gandhi did not design it to be an autobiography as he stated that his attempt was to not to follow Western genre, but to narrate the tale of his “experiments with truth” (M. Gandhi, Autobiography ix). The Autobiography is Indianised in Gandhi’s invocation of self (Atman) control—brahmacharya (Parekh, Colonialism 272-6). Therefore, in examining Gandhi’s discourse on brahmacharya and the construction of a “celibate nation” (Alter 8), I shall also analyse Gandhi’s spiritual idioms with reference to the position of women. In the Autobiography Gandhi mentions his various ‘experiments’ centred on self-control. Often the personal voice appears when Gandhi narrates the displeasure of
being insulted by the colonisers. With the spiritual transformation of Mohan Das to Mahatma Gandhi, the personal resentments give way to self-restraint.

Curiously, Gandhi, an Indian political figure, who devoted his entire life to India’s freedom movement, filled much of his *Autobiography* with events dealing with campaigns in South Africa. Divided into five parts, the first deals with his childhood experiences, confessions, atonements, the first experience of the power of *ahimsa,* stay in England and formative phases of vegetarianism.

The second part evaluates Gandhi’s arrival in South Africa where he had gone to legally instruct the counsel of Dada Abdulla and Co. (a private firm in South Africa). In South Africa, being an Indian, he experienced racial prejudices against the Indians. Indians, referred to as “coolies”, were not permitted to travel first class in railway coaches or walk on the pavements or move outdoors after a particular time (M. Gandhi, *Autobiography* 95). Time and again Gandhi absorbed these insults. In his *Autobiography,* he records the incident in which he was pushed out of the first class coach at Maritzburg in South Africa. With this insult in mind, he set out for Pretoria. In this context Gandhi stated: “The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial—only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process” (94). In Natal, Gandhi sought to legally fight for the rights of the “Indian Franchise.” The Natal Legislative Assembly passed a Bill depriving the Natal Indians the right to elect members of the Assembly. Although, the Bill was passed, it “infused a new life into the community and had brought home [. . .] the conviction that the community was one and indivisible” (118). Therefore, nationalism in Gandhi’s discourse was an answer to racial discrimination. A rich heritage was fostered to combat cultural inferiority among Indians.

Part III records Gandhi’s experiments about *brahmacharya,* self-help/reliance and his insistence upon hygiene and self-purification. He endeavoured to mitigate the charge of unclean habits and surroundings levelled against the Indian community. For this he undertook “house-to-house inspection” and awakened “in the Indian settler [. . .] a sense of duty to the motherland” (182). On comparing the deplorable conditions of the Indian railways with his experiences in Europe he stated: “Third class passengers are treated like sheep [. . .]. In Europe I travelled third [. . .] here I noticed no such
difference between the first and the third classes.” Gandhi believed that the miserable condition of railways was due to the “dirty and inconsiderate habits of the passengers.” He was of the view that the remedy was in reforming the “unpleasant habits” of “throwing of rubbish on the floor [. . .] shouting and yelling, and using foul language” (200).

The Orientalist modes are explicitly inherent in Gandhi’s concerns with the unsanitary conditions and surroundings. The idiom of improvement/reform was an Oriental legacy that informed the colonisers’ civilising mission. Gandhi was obsessed with personal cleanliness. His notion of swaraj was not only internal purification, but he also advocated external sanitation to discipline the masses. Gandhi was disturbed by the filthy conditions in villages. For this he engaged volunteers to wipe out the unclean atmosphere and sought the support of the Smritis that “laid the greatest emphasis on cleanliness both inward and outward” (142).

Part IV is a detailed description of Gandhi’s experiments in dietetics, fasts, satyagraha and ahimsa in South Africa. The concluding part is based on India. The experiments in South Africa were put to test in India. Ahimsa and satyagraha were embedded in Gandhi’s peasant-politics. Gandhi’s reforms in India started by penetrating rural India. Spinning initiated the swadeshi movement—the alternative moral economy of India.

Notably, Gandhi’s Autobiography was situated in South African experiences with brief snatches from Indian experiences. In his Autobiography, Gandhi presents the journey of his life as a spiritual odyssey. South Africa had been a launch pad in “Gandhi’s construction of his Indianness” (Markovits 81). Paradoxically, for the father of the nation, Indian nationalism was modelled on his South African experiences. Correspondingly, Gandhi expressed, “I wanted to acquaint India with the method I had tried in South Africa, and I desired to test in India” (M. Gandhi, Autobiography 330). Moreover, his knowledge of setting the ashrams for sarvodaya was derived from the influential reading of John Ruskin’s Unto This Last. It was on this basis that Tolstoy Farm was founded where Gandhi experimented with the education system. The spread of Western education was an important criterion for the British Empire in perpetuating the
ideology of reforming India. The English language provided the Orientalist with images as a reference for the nationalists to access their own past through colonial discourse.

Here, I would like to suggest the impact of Western education/thinkers on Gandhi's political trajectory. Gandhi expressed his indebtedness to European literature that formed the key to his experiments on dietetics and by extension with brahmacharya. Howard Williams's *The Ethics of Diet*, Dr Anna Kingford's *The Perfect Way in Diet* and Henry Salt's *Plea for Vegetarianism* were some of the European works that developed Gandhi's interest in experiments on food (41-2). Gandhi's 'Indian' side attacked and reversed Macaulay's breed of English educated Indians and instead pleaded for an indigenous based education (M. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* 79). At Tolstoy Farm, for instance, education was imparted at three levels: literary level, spiritual and vocational training. Literary study was confined to the teaching of Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati, English and some Sanskrit with elementary history, geography and arithmetic. Gandhi conceived spiritual and moral training as basic education. He believed that spiritual guidance had to be preceded by his own exercise of the spirit. The discipline imposed on his students at Tolstoy Farm contributed to his inner restraint. As a teacher at the Farm, he learned the importance of character building.

These experiences/experiments were applied to brahmacharya. Gandhi insisted that brahmacharya was purity of soul and mind. He often experimented on himself to test the validity of his theories. For instance, Gandhi slept nude with Manu, his granddaughter and considered it “as part of what might be (my) last yajna” (Pyarelal 581). Gandhi's experiments were analogous to scientific discoveries, but unlike their complete adherence to reason, his spiritual research conflated faith, religion and science. For instance, he justified brahmacharya, saying it caused the loss of vital fluid, the source of spiritual energy. Without reasoning he accepted the Hindu belief that the vital fluid secreted during sexual intercourse could be “transformed into ojas or spiritual energy that generated pratibha (knowledge in a flash) and prajna (refined and enlightened reasoning)” (Parekh, *Colonialism* 177). Gandhi stressed that the secretion “should be utilised for enhancing one’s mental, physical and spiritual energy” (M.Gandhi, *Nature Cure* 5).
Not only his Autobiography but the Hind Swaraj also deals with correlating the body politic with the corporeal body. Gandhi accentuated that if body and soul remain un tarnished it became easy to practice ahimsa. So essential was self-discipline to swaraj. Gandhi conceded “without self-purification the observance of the law of ahimsa must remain an empty dream” (M. Gandhi, Autobiography 420). He remarked: “The invention of the simple matchstick [...] and the discovery of electricity confounded all preconceived notions. What is true of physical things is equally true of things spiritual [...]. It is our duty to investigate the hidden possibilities of the law of self-restraint” (M. Gandhi, Key to Health 47-8). The “law of self-restraint” was expressed as a scientific explanation to his discourse on brahmacharya. Gandhi quoted the Gita to establish the traditional meaning of celibacy. Recognizing the spiritual exercises as intrinsic to ahimsa and brahmacharya, he referred to the Gita as fundamental to self-control.

Gandhi’s India was a “celibate nation” (Alter 8). His conviction was that the “true service of the country demands this (brahmacharya) observance” (M. Gandhi, Harijan xi: 192). Paradoxically, Gandhi vehemently spoke against adherence to certain scriptural authorities that had defaced Indian culture, but laid down his own rules of conduct to be developed in a celibate nation. Gandhi’s brahmachari was imagined as different from the masses who could transform sexual energy into a sublimated force (M. Gandhi, Hindu Dharma 124).

Gandhi’s national ideals were rooted in swadeshi. It encompassed his personal experiences of self-help. In fact, Gandhi’s political ideology seems to be an overlapping of self-restraint, self-reliance and self-government. The soul (Atman) was the content of a disciplined body. This ethical theory encapsulated his political religious discourse. Truth was his God attainable through non-violence (M. Gandhi, Autobiography x). The concept of religion was neatly packed in his politics. Gandhi was convinced that religion and politics were congruent and “those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means” (420).

I re-position Gandhi’s experiments as a method of inscribing India within the realm of tradition. Though the content of Indian traditions differed, their form remained unchanged. This implies that the traditional values were not acceptable without questioning their content/meaning but their form—religious orientations—persisted
Gandhi's nationalism was centred on his experiments and the locus standi of his experiments was the human body. Gandhi perceived that if the body could be freed from impurities, that is, worldly possessions then swaraj was not a distant dream. This conjuncture of the corporeal body with the body politic formed the core of Gandhi's ideology. To put it differently, Gandhi's nation-building was focused on "body corporeal as well as the body politic" (Corbridge and Harris 170). The body politic was impregnated with traditional and cultural meanings of renunciation—brahmacharya and tapasya. All these traditional essences formed a cognitive model for Gandhi's India. The main principle of his experiment was ahimsa. The inner self was cast into a scientific laboratory and the instruments were satyagraha, ahimsa and brahmacharya—embodiments of self-discipline.

Gandhi was a multi-faceted personality who was an ardent religious believer and also stood for the cause of women's liberation. He spiritualised politics and condemned the use of violence. Apart from these facets, his impact on women's emancipation cannot be neglected. My interrogation is not concerned with the well-known facets of Gandhi's personality but how his 'radical reformation' of women was anchored to the domestic or traditional plane of Hindu society. Problematizing the status of women had been the European norm to judge the conditions of Indian civilization. The low status of women reflected backwardness. Therefore, the women question became a standard with the reformers and the nationalists.

Indian tradition was bifurcated into two main divisions: the inner/spiritual and outer/material. The 'true' identity of an Indian was conceived within inner/spiritual terrain (Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee 120). This terrain stood for religion, self-improvement and self-restraint. Gandhi conflated the spiritual sphere with his feminisation of politics. Satyagraha, chastity, self-suffering and spirituality were invested in women. Tradition/woman had to be reformulated and removed from the degenerated encrustations for reformation. Gandhi's Autobiography does not mention much about women and the introduction of woman as a symbol of tradition. However, this facet of Gandhi's politics is covertly embodied in his native idioms of satyagraha and tapasya. Therefore, in this chapter, satyagraha and other religious connotations shall be thoroughly interspersed and extended to decode the women and tradition equation.
The *Gita* informs that suffering emerges from *avidya* or ignorance. This ignorance comes from the contemplation of the consequences of *karma* and when one seeks after the results it leads to attachment and misery. Therefore, the injunctions of the *Gita* amplified detached action, that is, performance of selfless duty with practical engagement in the material world (*Bhagavad Gita* 47: 60-1).

Gandhi’s political philosophy heavily drew from Indian mythology. In accordance with the teachings of the *Gita*, Gandhi wrote: “I have felt that in trying to enforce in one’s life the central teaching of the *Gita*, one is bound to follow truth and *ahimsa*. When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa*” (Cited in Bondurant 116). However, Gandhi’s scriptural truths were subordinated to his discursive precepts and political practices. Ethical elements were configured from the ascetic zone to the active socio-political arena. In this context he remarked: “I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas [ ... ] . My belief in the Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired [ ... ] . I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense (Cited in Bondurant 121).

The civil disobedience, fasts and *hartals* were not Gandhi’s innovation. These precolonial oppositions transformed coercive practices of the opponent and the victim’s self-suffering compelled a soul transformation of the ruler (Hardiman 43-44). Following these ancient beliefs, Gandhi plunged into the political field. He took cognisance of India’s political and social problems and applied his fashioned traditions in agreement with India’s socio-political make-up. Gandhi succeeded in taking the brahmanical traditions out of the upper echelons of society and disseminated it among the masses. However, the sanskritised traditions continued to inform his political philosophy. For instance, he used the brahmanical word *tapas* to demonstrate its relevance in the political field. As he insisted: “There are instances of *tapas* at every step in Hindu mythology. Parvati desired to win Shankara and she took to *tapas* [ ... ] . When Rama went to exile, Bharata plunged into yoga discipline, practised austere *tapas* [ ... ] . I cannot possibly live without *tapas* (Iyer, *Moral and Political Writings* ii: 145).

Here a slight digression may be permitted to analyse the elitist strategy of mass mobilisation. Ultimately this deviation will converge with Gandhi’s ‘experiments’ on
The position of the intellectuals who claim to have “epistemic access to [. . .] the experiences of others” is ambiguous (Hau 134). Political struggle is popularised when the nationalists/intellectuals carry out the task of ‘speaking’ for the people. Though it is crucial in unifying the masses, the nature of ‘true’ representation and the reliability of the narrative complicate the discourse of the intellectuals. The Orientalists generalised Indian culture as spiritual in their study of the Indian scriptures. Likewise Gandhi’s peasant politics suffers the limitations of a ‘true’ representation. Mass mobilisation or popular consent was a preparatory ground for Gandhi’s experiments. In this context the Ahmedabad textile mill strike exemplifies Gandhi’s ideological representation of the workers.

After the discontinuance of the plague allowance to mill workers, a crisis occurred between the owners and the workers. Gandhi’s intervention and appeals forced the owners to offer a 20 per cent bonus instead of the allowance but the workers demanded 50 per cent bonus and this led to a factory lockout. Gandhi persuaded the workers to give up their demands, as these were not justified. His justifications were imposed on workers and he tried to pacify them by declaring, “some workers say that we can demand more than 35% [. . .] . I say you demand even 100% increase. But if you make such demand, it would be unjust [. . .] . I believe that the demand of 35% is just” (Cited in Arun Sen 188). Certain workers yielded to the demands of the owners and started to work for 20 per cent. Against this, Gandhi declared fast for “as their representative” Gandhi felt he could transform the hearts of the mill-owners (M. Gandhi, Autobiography 360).

The Chauri Chaura event of 1922 is a pointer to Gandhi’s Orientalist moorings. For an account of the Chauri Chaura event I have relied on Shahid Amin’s Event, Memory and Metaphor. This event establishes the gulf between the bourgeois and the peasant politics. The Chauri Chaura event occurred in the name of the Mahatma. The mob set the police station afire. Gandhi vehemently condemned the violent agitation as heinous and immediately called off the civil resistance movement. In the same spirit, Gandhi criticized the agrarian agitations in Awadh that occurred before the Chauri Chaura event. Gandhi remarked, “we can’t get swaraj by using the lakri [. . .] our kisan
brothers have committed a mistake [...]. I shall have to do penance” (Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma” 21).

The colonisers presumed the working class to be simple, exploited by the local landlords. The nationalists too projected the peasant class as simple, but exploited by British authorities. Likewise, Gandhi’s satyagraha informed the peasants that their poverty was due to the economic exploitation by the colonisers. Therefore, the peasant consciousness had to be stirred through a national organisation. Despite the fact that nationalism espoused peasantry as an anti-colonial force that was limited to slogans and mass gatherings for Gandhi’s darshans, the nationalists were attentive to “keep their (peasants’) participation limited to the forms of bourgeois representative politics” (Chatterjee, Mapping Subaltern 10). The peasant consciousness was receptive to elite politics and was reduced to an unorganised constituent of a mob. It was left to the satyagrahi leaders to morally regenerate the peasants while registering in their minds the miraculous power of the Mahatma who would liberate them from the oppressive zamindars, British planters and rent enhancements. The peasants comprehended Gandhi as a deity who had come to curb the oppressors. For them swaraj meant relief from the tenants’ oppressions and the zamindari system. The peasants could not understand the religious and philosophical terminology of swaraj. The Champaran episode apotheosised Gandhi. It construed him as a messiah who could abolish the unjustified rent enhancements. The rich peasants opposed the planters from whom they faced stiff competition. Liberating them from unwanted rent impositions preserved the power of the rural elites. The poor peasants constituted a part of the nationalist programme. They were a “part of a nation” but “forever distanced” from political participations. Gandhi understood that India was basically a village, therefore spreading his message among the peasants and gathering their support could obtain swaraj. Nevertheless, the rural population made sense of swaraj not in terms of the discursive forms of the elite politics, but decoded and transformed the nationalist trope “in the peasant domain of politics” (Chatterjee, “Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society” 194).

The deification of Gandhi, the Chauri Chaura event, the Ahmedabad mill strike and the Awadh agitations, all coalesce around the putative icon of Gandhi “who was not as he really was, but as they (peasants) had thought him up’ (54). Gandhi himself was at
discomfort and confessed, “The woes of Mahatmas are known to The Mahatmas alone” (M. Gandhi, Autobiography 202). A case in point is Gandhi’s voyage from Gorakhpur on 8 February 1921. During the journey the people raised slogans to welcome Gandhi at every station. Whenever the train halted, the people got into the train and raised cries. This irritated Gandhi and he shouted, “Please go away. Why do you harass us at this dark hour?” (Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma” 20).

Unlike certain cultural revivalists Gandhi did not legitimise Hinduism as the only religion of India. Instead, he assimilated, enriched and redefined Hinduism. Gandhi cannot be rejected as a Hindu chauvinist, but his reinterpretation and reformation of Hinduism cannot be neglected. In fact, a repositioning of Hinduism formed the core of his political philosophy. An exploration of the interface between nationalism and Orientalism illustrates the imbrications of religion, gender and politics as power categories of control. An insight into Indian traditions is necessary because it formed the canvass on which diverse versions of cultural identity were imaginatively painted. Whenever a need was felt religion was erected. The introduction of a religious glossary in the nationalist discourse was efficacious. It denoted a lack of knowledge and misinterpretation of Hindu dharma by Europeans. In fact, the textual study of India was like a baton passed from the Orientalists and the Brahmans to the colonial and nationalist discourse. As such the “inner”/“outer”, exclusion/inclusion had been a recurrent theme with the Orientalists and the nationalists (Chatterjee, Partha Chattejee 120). Gandhi’s ideology, thereby, included certain aspects, which made him proud of his cultural heritage and excluded the degenerate elements of Indian culture. The exclusion/inclusion politics fashioned India into an alternative traditional framework. Women too were a part of this binary (exclusion/inclusion) discourse and were expected to become a symbol of moral strength in the nationalist struggle. Therefore, their identity intersected with the national identity. Women became what the nation required of them (Zutshi 94).

Gandhi involved women in picketing and protesting against the rise of liquor. He thought that women alone knew the suffering caused by their intoxicated men. Clearly women were called to come out of the four walls in national interest, yet were tethered to the domestic sphere. The nation was imagined in feminine terms. The control of the female was entwined to the control of nation/national consciousness. Gandhi gave a
mystic flavour to his political struggle by stamping women as repositories of spirituality. The rendering of women to the spiritual tradition loaded the female ‘site’ with essentialist stereotypes and eternal values. The Orientalists in their study of Indian culture compiled data from the ancient texts to focus on the status of women in the Aryan and precolonial society. James Mill, for instance, positioned Indian women “in extreme degradation […] deprived of education.” The Hindu wife was not considered worthy to have meals with her husband and this symbolised “barbarity” (Cited in Chakravarti 35). The contention of satihood was a major theme for the nationalists and the Orientalists. The study of sati provided the Orientalists a way of asserting their supremacy over Hindu dharma. The repugnance towards the barbaric act of sati had to be authenticated. The Orientalist archaeology of knowledge, derived from the study of ancient India, underscored the barbarism inherent in sati. They posited that sati did not enjoy religious sanctions and was misinterpreted by native pundits (31-2). Through the textual study of Indian customs and culture, the Orientalists highlighted the sublime position endorsed on women in the classical age. The status of women was more of a “political encounter between a colonial state and the supposed tradition of a conquered people” (Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee 119). Thus in emphasising women as the grounds for political battle both nationalism and Orientalism associated women as an embodiment of culture.

The colonists examined the role of women in India to demonstrate the incapability of Indians to rule themselves. The colonists believed in confirming their superiority by highlighting the degrading customs that subjected women to atrocities. The status of women was more of a “political encounter between a colonial state and the supposed tradition of a conquered people” (Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee 119). Thus in emphasising women as the grounds for political battle both nationalism and Orientalism associated women as an embodiment of culture. The colonists examined the role of women in India to demonstrate the incapability of Indians to rule themselves. The colonists believed in confirming their superiority by highlighting the degrading customs that subjected women to atrocities.

Gandhi reworked on the tradition of sati “to recapture social and moral ground” from the British (Appadurai 334). He astutely extended the mysticism and devotion of
sati to the service of the nation. With reference to this he wrote: “Sati would regard marriage not as a means of satisfying the animal appetite but as a means of realising the ideal of selfless and self-effacing service by completely merging her individuality in her husband’s. She would prove her satihood not by mounting the funeral pyre [. . .] but she would prove it with every breath (M. Gandhi, Young India xiii: 116). In effacing women in the domestic chores, Gandhi gives an ethical connotation to the polemical issue of sati. The cultural contest between the nationalists and the Orientalists reduced women as “signifiers of tradition” (Mondal 915). The brahmanical dichotomy between purity/impurity is explicitly stated in his ideal of a pure woman. In Gandhi’s views, satihood was “the acme of purity” which was attainable “only through constant striving, immolation of the spirit from day to day” (Cited in Pyarelal 323). Significantly, Gandhi aspired to improve the social conditions of Indian women, but he often got trapped in the Orientalist equation of women and tradition.

Although Gandhi reinforced the ancient and idealized virtues in woman, their passive resistance could not transcend the domestic or familial roles. Women had “to play different but complementary roles” (K. Ahmed 9). Gandhi’s reforms visualised the strength of woman as a mother. Woman was sketched for mundane positions. As he wrote: “She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is breadwinner. She is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the care-taker in every sense of the term”(M. Gandhi, Harijan viii: 13). Gandhi’s ideal image of woman was not Rani of Jhansi but Sita, Savitri and Damayanti who preserved their chastity and honour. As a vanguard of women’s purity, he essentialised Indian women as ‘passive’, ‘tolerant’ and embodiments of sacrifice. Similar essences are evident in the early spiritualists like Vivekananda and Aurobindo, who worshipped women as divine mother.

Women occupied a pivotal position in Gandhi’s satyagraha but functioned within a “new form of patriarchy”(Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee 148). Gandhi’s attitude towards women’s participation in the national movement had certain anomalies. At one level her primary duty was motherhood and domestic care, on the other he argued against the “rigid division of labour” between men and women (Kishwar 1699). Regarding this he wrote: “it is contrary to experience to say that any vocation is exclusively reserved for one sex only [. . .] . While women naturally cook for the household, organised cooking
Gandhi’s patriarchal control drew a *lakshman rekha* around Hindu womanhood. His sublimation of women finds parallel in Hindu traditions, where women were considered “the repository of Indian (Hindu) tradition, the essence, the ‘inner’ side, the spirituality and greatness of Hindu civilisation” (Pandey, “Which of us are Hindus?” 260). Woman was personified as goddess. The qualities of ‘passivity’, ‘suffering’, ‘toleration’ and ‘spirituality’ were considered natural to women. While addressing the textile mill workers in Ahmedabad, Gandhi announced:

If the workers find it necessary today to send their wives and children to work in factories, it is our duty to see that they do not have to [. . .] . Work is not for children. Nor is it for women to work in factories. They have plenty of work in their homes. They should attend to the bringing up of their children; they may give peace to the husband when he returns home tired, minister to him, soothe him if he is angry and do any other work they can staying at home [. . .] . If we send them to the factories, who will look after our domestic and social affairs? If woman go out to work, our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline [. . .] . I feel convinced that for men and women to go out for work together will mean the fall of both. Do not, therefore, send your women out to work; protect their honour; if you have any manliness in you, it is for you to see that no one casts an evil eye on them. (Cited in Patel 17)

Gandhi’s feminisation of politics envisaged a national identity that emerged from the emancipation of women, spinning and weaving. Through spinning and weaving, the nationalists came together for one common cause—*swaraj*. Another Gandhian economics was the production of khadi to uplift the masses and make them self-sufficient. It was a means of purifying the soul. Gandhi remarked: “In spinning they have a natural advantage over men [. . .] . Spinning is essentially a slow and comparatively silent process. Women are the embodiment of sacrifice and non-violence”
(M. Gandhi, Collected Works 70: 381). Thus, the means of production, that is, khadi, spinning and weaving were “strategically gendered” (Katrak 397). Similar to the glorification and spiritualization of the ancient Indian civilisation, Gandhi too retrieved ancient womanhood where Sita, Savitri and Damyanti —the epitomes of self-sacrifice and purity— were put on a pedestal. Self-suffering was a quality supposed to be natural to women and the sole responsibility of Ramrajya was entrusted upon them. The glorification of suffering, through mythological allusions, tended to imbue the feminine ‘site’ as ‘pristine’, cultural and traditional entity. Women were given the status of divine power but it was subjected to control. They were imagined as passive and highly tolerant to suffering. These attributes acquired positive connotations in Gandhi’s discourse. In fact, his politics revolved around the virtuous qualities of women.

As a “critical traditionalist”, Gandhi sometimes partially breaks from the continuity of tradition in rebelling against rigid doctrines and often inserts his own formulations (Parekh, Colonialism 35). It is this juncture of continuity and discontinuity from tradition that informs my postulations of Gandhi’s philosophy. The colonisers projected women as barbarous, submissive and subservient. Woman was the criteria in judging the status of Indian civilisation. The Orientalists focused on gender in India. In establishing the depravity of Indian women, they confirmed the ‘irrationality’ of Indian customs. Indian women were imagined either as sensuous or subservient and chaste in the works of European travellers and writers. The different perspectives nevertheless coalesced and produced the image of women as the Other. The Orientalists travellers emphasised sati as a superstitious custom or as traditions enforced by the greedy brahmans (Teltscher 54-5). Women were interpreted as symbol of traditions. Therefore the Orientalists marshalled textual evidence to authenticate the “barbarity” inherent in the practice of sati. James Mill remarks: “Suttee (sic) [. . .] a barbarous superstition which had prevailed from remote antiquity, and which was sanctioned by texts believed by the Hindus to have been uttered by divine legislators, and having in their estimation, the weight of law and religion” (Mill ix: 185). Thus it was not an analysis of women per se but women as a metonym for Indian traditions. The colonists simultaneously constructed their masculinity in opposition to the weak and submissive femininity characteristic of the Indians (Veer, Imperial Encounters 95).
The nationalists opposed this as cultural intrusion and demarcated the ‘site’ of women as a traditional terrain, worthy of preserving from imperial gaze. Gandhi formulated his agenda that revolted against traditional denigration of women but could not think of her without symbolising her as mythical Sita, Damyanti and Draupadi.

Women were reduced to mothers and sisters capable of nurturing. In fact, women being the incarnation of non-violence and sacrifice were portrayed as desexualised whose salvation depended on observing chastity. Brahmacharya meant the observance of sexual impulses as impure. This contained and control women. Thereby, national regeneration was linked with female sexual control. However, Gandhi’s attitude towards women’s emancipation did not question the patriarchal ideology of woman as a housewife. Women were mobilised for the swadeshi movement since it was “the woman’s sphere. To look after children, to dress them, is the mother’s duty and, therefore, it is necessary that women should be fired with the spirit of Swadeshi” (M. Gandhi, Collected Works 15: 291). Gandhi’s liberation of women seemed to challenge the traditional role of women but his moral preoccupations marginalised their individuality for nationalist aspirations. The political struggle constructed women as “good satyagrahis but the real issues that concerned them as women were regarded by the men as of secondary importance” (Jayawardena 99).

Gandhi failed to transcend his patriarchal moorings. Even if he believed in equality of the sexes, he could not approve of women “to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth.” for he considered it to be a “reversion to barbarity” (M. Gandhi, Collected Works 71: 207-8). Instead of challenging the domestication of women, Gandhi’s programme was oriented towards moral change. He pointed to the Vedas, the Smritis and the Gita to conceptualise his political discourse. Such references to the scriptural authorities constituted a continuity of Indian traditions. However, Gandhi’s reinterpretation of the content of Hindu philosophy for articulating his political programme sometimes turned away from Indian traditions. As Gandhi legitimised his stand by emphasising that his political practice was “to put a new but natural and logical interpretation upon the whole teaching of the Gita and the spirit of Hinduism” (M. Gandhi, Hindu Dharma 157).
The task given to women in the freedom movement was spinning, practising *swadeshi*, picketing of both liquor and foreign cloth shops. According to Gandhi, women were suitable candidates for these jobs because it required the potential for non-violence. They were well versed with the domestic problems and therefore, could be appropriated for the assigned tasks. Women played an active role in the manufacture of salt. Although it involved women actively it was symbolic of “kitchen as linked to the nation” (Kishwar 1696).

As a Victorian puritanist, Gandhi equated woman’s virtue and chastity with her spiritual strength and fearlessness. Gandhi’s choice of the mythological figures cultivated women’s moral courage and not their individual strength. The individuality of women was swept under the liberal carpets of reform. It is significant that Gandhi wanted to construct women’s image not as defined by traditions but suitable for the nationalist movement, albeit limited within the traditional boundaries. Gandhi desired women to “imitate Sita’s virtue, Sita’s humility, Sita’s simplicity and Sita’s bravery” (M. Gandhi, *Collected Works* 35: 39). He advocated the equality of the male and the female sex but his “dual attitude” contained women’s liberation within the domestic roles (Kishwar 1700). To take another instance, as an index to Gandhi’s patriarchal ideology is the role of the prostitutes in swaraj. At Barisal, the “fallen sisters”, as Gandhi used to address the prostitutes, had organised social services for the promotion of spinning and nursing the poor. Gandhi categorically rejected their participation in swaraj and declared: “We will not incorporate an association of known thieves for the purpose for which these women have formed their association” (M. Gandhi, *Collected Works* 27: 291). Despite the fact that he raised the women’s question in the nationalist struggle, he could not ‘rescue’ the “fallen” women who were suggested to become the “sannayasins of India” (M. Gandhi, “Our Fallen Sisters” 755). Gandhi’s middle-class attitude involved women only as a symbol of pure tradition required for national liberation.

Gandhi’s fundamental understanding of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ allowed him to work liberally for the women’s cause. Though Gandhi favoured widow remarriage, he did not oppose voluntary widowhood. He was convinced that a “real Hindu widow is a treasure. She is one of the gifts of Hinduism to humanity” (M. Gandhi, *Collected Works* 31: 314). Throughout, Gandhi’s perspective on women, his obsession with the symbols
of chastity and purity are reflected. Gandhi asserted India’s self-identity by contrasting its spirituality with Western materialism.

In Gandhi’s vocabulary the epic war narratives of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were transformed into the theory of non-violence and spiritual strength. While discussing the myth of lord *Rama*, Gandhi insisted, “what is the meaning of *Rama*, a mere human being, with his host of monkeys, pitting himself against the insolent strength of ten-headed *Ravana* [...] Does it not mean the conquest of physical might by spiritual strength?” (Cited in Bondurant 112).

Tracing Gandhi’s adaptation of Western theory (democracy, liberty, equality) that was compatible with Indian traditions reflects the nationalist predicament of selective assimilation. Nationalism in its imitate the imperial language. It had to show its dissent by changing the content of Western ideas on democracy and freedom. However, the change in content could not dismantle the authority that spoke for the nation. To come back to the strategy behind selective assimilation is first to handle the question: what was the “ideological sieve” (Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee 117) through which a proposal first had to pass and ultimately gain approval for a nationalist cause? On examining the patriarchal formulations intrinsic to Gandhi’s cause for woman’s emancipation it becomes explicit how he accepted the essence of women as enshrined in the scriptures which had also been an Orientalist assertion, but reversed his metaphors for the attainment of *swaraj*.

Gandhi’s fasts, for instance, were to oppose unjustified acts of violence and were also in congruence with Hindu philosophy of penance. One cannot be indifferent to Gandhi’s Hindu family background and its effect on his reproduction of knowledge in the Indian culture. His mother’s religious beliefs were a strong influence on the observance of his fasts. Gandhi’s innovation was the introduction of the *ekadashi* fasts, that his mother observed, in his experiments with *brahmacharya*. Paradoxically, reared in Vaishnav, tradition Gandhi gave credit to Madame Blavotsky’s *Key to Theosophy* for stimulating in him “the desire to read books on Hinduism” (M. Gandhi Autobiography 58).
Gandhi confessed his devotion to sensuality in his youth. He was ashamed of his “carnal desire” that had overpowered him just before his father’s death (26). His accounts of lustful cravings reveal his ordeals of control over sexuality. *Brahmacharya*, fasts, control on palate and portrayal of women as mothers and sisters but not temptresses, are indices of his battle with sexuality. Rather the intersections of personal and political experiences are quite conspicuous. Gandhi transformed his sexual cravings to spirituality in the interest of the nation. He believed that devotion towards one’s community demanded life of a “vanaprastha —of one retired, from household cares” (173). It is noteworthy how *vanaprastha* is altered from its earlier version of renunciation of worldly pursuits to retirement from (only) household cares.

The experiments in dietetics, which had its inception in the vow given to his mother—that he would abstain from non-religious indulgences—graduated to the control of palate in *brahmacharya*. Gandhi’s experiments were to search within himself his true identity and by extension, the meaning of *swaraj*. Unlike other nationalists, his search for identity was not cultural/political but one of “self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha” (x). As a scientist working in an open laboratory Gandhi believed in the “practical applications of [...] principles” (xi). The rationalisation of his principles outside European institution offered an alternative power discourse.

Colonial anthropology, literature, history and various other disciplines that fostered colonisation of the past through the construction of Indian traditions, set up a cultural and intellectual ambience that had a deep-seated impact on Indian nationalism. Strikingly, most of the nationalists embarked upon a spiritual self-discovery after reading Western philosophy and literature. Often this ‘discovery’ was connected with the ‘discovery’ of the Indian past. In linking the nation with the self, the public and private realm became one and furthered the engineering of an enlarged spiritual community. For instance, Gandhi’s control of his dietetics graduated to spiritual control and became an exemplar of *brahmacharya* in the political field. The nationalists were encouraged to sacrifice their pleasure for the nation’s sake. According to Gandhi, self-discipline could restore national pride and establish a community of spiritually ‘pure’ people. Despite the fact that the Orientalists imagined India as a spiritual land, the same stereotype was retained, nevertheless appropriated to combat colonialism. Nationalism was an
anticolonial struggle that gained mass support due to the cultural underpinnings. In orienting nationalism towards a spiritual past, a common tradition was promoted that legitimised collective resistance against any cultural intrusion. Orientalism ushered textual knowledge of India that drew attention to the spirituality of the East, which provided a counter-identity to the materialistically advanced West. In accepting this configuration, the nationalists claimed spiritualism as an indigenous form of knowledge and applied this as a template in the nationalist movement for freedom.

Gandhi was able to get mass support mainly because of his spiritual idioms. Considering renunciation as the fulcrum of Hindu philosophy, Gandhi asserted: “I believe implicitly in the Hindu aphorism, that no one truly knows the Shastras who has not attained perfection in Innocence (Ahimsa), Truth (Satya) and self-control (Brahmacharya) and who has not renounced all acquisition or possession of wealth” (M. Gandhi “Hinduism” 802). Gandhi adopted the symbol of renunciation in practising and preaching brahmacharya. However his belief in renunciation was in practicing austerity and self-discipline. In aspiring for brahmacharya, Gandhi portrayed nationalism as a religious artefact, attainable by sacrificing worldly pursuits. Though Gandhi accepted Indian religion as a driving force for cultural resistance, he internalised the colonial paradigm of India as a religious land.
Notes

1 See Shahid Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma” 31. The peasants had conceptualised the Mahatma whose commands had to be obeyed. They believed that the non-conformist suffered divine punishments. In this context Amin Cites a number of rumours: “Pt Damodar Pandey [. . .] reported that a man [. . .] near his village had called Gandhi names, as a result of which his eyelids had got stuck. A man [. . .] had vowed not to smoke, but he took to smoking once again. Suddenly he was hemmed in by worms.” These rumours reflected popular Hindu belief and practices. They also indicated how Gandhi’s meanings of Indian traditions and rituals percolated to the masses.